DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 119 CS 501 811

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TITLE After the Lights Come Up: Students Talk about Films.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Film Association (College Park, Maryland, August 1-5, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; College Students; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Discussion Experience; *Educational Research; *Films; *Film Study; Higher Education; Media Research
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Research

ABSTRACT

In order to assess the nature of conversations that students in an introductory film-appreciation class had after the showing of various films, this study used questionnaires to determine with whom students talked, the number of the conversations, their duration and subjects. It was found that both the content and the duration of discussions varied with the film that was the topic of consideration. In general, no significant differences and few interesting differences were found between men and women, communication majors and nonmajors, students whose evaluations of the course were low or high, or those who received good grades or poor grades. This research indicates that, while what goes on in class does affect what students talk about, the relationships between these two factors may be subtle and unexpected; suggestions are made for improving the questionnaires and the research design. Tabulations of data are included. (KS)

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AFTER THE LIGHTS COME UP: STUDENTS TALK ABOUT FILMS

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AFTER THE LIGHTS COME UP:
STUDENTS TALK ABOUT FILMS

As student interest in film study continues to increase on the nation's campuses, more teachers have found themselves teaching more students in introductory film courses. Although course goals vary, most of these teachers are trying to raise the consciousness of their audience. Teachers want, in Griffith's words, to make their students see: to see elements of form and content, plot and theme, style and manipulation that they were unaware of; and to be able to talk about their new perceptions with others.

As teachers we guide their talk in class discussions. But don't we hope that students will use what they have learned outside of the classroom; that they will continue to talk about the films after class; and that they will see and talk about current releases and TV in new ways?

In the fall of 1976 I surveyed my Film Appreciation students to find out whether they talked aobut films outside of class, who they talked with, and what they talked aobut. This study points the way to more sophisticated comparisons among films, classes, and teachers. This research is underway, and I welcome suggestions and participation from other teachers who would be willing to survey their classes and compare their data with mine. (Write to me at the Department of Communication, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH 44115.)

Who were the subjects? The subjects were self-selected (participation was voluntary) from my Film Appreciation class. Eighty-five students were enrolled (67% male); the average age was 21; 17% were freshmen, 37% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 19% seniors; almost 90% were taking their first film class; about 33% considered themselves "film buffs"; and about 33% were Communication majors (mass communication or interpersonal communication; we have no film major).

The class is a general introduction to film and touches lightly on a number

of topics: history, criticism, theory, production, directing, performance, genres and types of films, etc. During the quarter the students see many short films, and that quarter they also saw (in this order) Dr. Strangelove, Potemkin, Citizen Kane, Juliet of the Spirits, Bicycle Thief, and High School. A questionnaire was administered a few days after Dr. Strangelove; the results of that survey were used to prepare a new questionnaire which was used for all of the other feature films. It was administered three or four days after the class had seen the film. Not all students saw and responded to each film. Students were asked how many conversations they had outside of class about the film, how much time they spent talking, who they talked with, and what they talked about.

Who did they talk with? From 19-40 per cent of the subjects (the numbers varied with different films - see Table I) reported no conversations. Of these who reported conversations, most talked with friends--people they knew well--who were not taking the class with them. Specifically, 64-85% talked with people they knew well, outside of class; 36-54% talked with people they knew well who were in class; 10-18% struck up casual conversations with people they didn't know well, from class; and a few--0-12%--talked with people they didn't know outside of class.

How many conversations did they have? Because the range of the number of conversations is high, I believe that the median is a more descriptive statistic than the mean. Table I reports the number of subjects responding to five films, (data from the pretest film, Dr. Strangelove, was not comparable); the percentage reporting no conversations; the number of conversations (categorized "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 or more"); and the total time involved in all conversations.

TABLE I HERE

Notice that there is a variation from film to film. Unfortunately, this difference is confounded with elapsed time in the course. It is not possible

to attribute the decrease in number of conversations to either the films, the course, or the approach of the end of the term. I would expect that, if the course were successful, students would have more conversations per film at the end of the course than at the beginning; but I would also expect that Kane is a more interesting film than High School (for this class). The effects of course duration and interest in this case might cancel each other out.

How long did they talk? The total amounts of time involved in all conversations are reported in Table I. The same confounding of films with course duration occurs. Again, because of the great range of times reported, the median is, I believe, a more accurate index than the mean. Many conversations were quite short; my impression is that they occurred on the way out of the classroom. On the other hand, some were quite long--over an hour. Informal feedback indicates that some of these took place at home with spouses. Cleveland State is a commuter University; the atmosphere is not conducive to extended conversations on campus.

What topics were discussed? Based on the pretest, the subjects could report that they did, or did not, talk about: plot, acting--leads, acting--supporting roles, script, director and direction, cinematography, editing, sets and costumes, theme, personal significance, social importance, comparisons with other films, comparisons with books and plays, and the ubiquitous "other." The average number of topics each person discussed varied from film to film (see Table II); again, course duration is confounded with films.

TABLE II HERE

Table III reports specific topics discussed for each film, with the percentage calculated excluding those subjects who had no conversations.

TABLE III HERE

"Plot" and "theme" are the most popular topics for conversation, with "act-

ing" and "directing" following--regardless of film. "Plot" is even a major topic for Wiseman's documentary High School, though that is the lowest percentage (and the meaning of the word "plot" must change with respect to this film!).

That the test instrument is valid is shown, I believe, by the changes in percentages for "acting--leads" from 10 and 15 for Potemkin and High School--films without heroes--to 70 for Welles in Kane. Validity is also tested by the low percentage for "editing" (3) for Bicycle Thief, where a point is that the editing is unobtrusive, to the high percentage for Potemkin (54), where the editing is most of the point of showing the film.

Indeed, Bicycyle Thief is conspicuous for its low conversational value in all production variables: "direction," "cinematography," "editing," and "sets and costumes." This suggests that my efforts as a teacher to get the students to "see" these unobtrusive variables were not very successful.

Juliet of the Spirits was used in the course to illustrate the use of color (among other things), and the high percentage given to "sets and costumes" (71, with Kane the next highest at 30) supports this use. Juliet was the lowest film for "social importance" (Potemkin and High School left there) and was also low for "personal significance." A group older than mine (average age 21) might have responded differently to Juliet.

The most conversations about "personal significance" were in relation to the film High School. Since most of the class were only one or two years out of high school themselves, this is easy to understand.

Whether there are changes in the topics discussed that are a result of changes over time during the course (learning), it is not possible to say from this research. Once again, duration and films are confounded, and I believe that the differences that are seen can, in general, be attributed to the films. Secondarily, they can be attributed to the use of the film in class (for exam-

ple, Potemkin for editing, Juliet for color). If there is any general change due to learning, it is buried.

That the teacher makes some difference, however, can be seen in Table IV. A second section of the course was offered that quarter under another instructor. It was an evening class with about 35 students, slightly older but otherwise similar. To the extent that it is possible to make a general distinction between the teachers' approaches to film, mine is technique-, industry-, and communication-oriented; his is narrative structure- and criticism-oriented. He is a member of the English Department.

TABLE IV HERE

The differences, however, are not always what would be expected. Given the difference in our approaches, my students might be expected to talk more about "acting," and they did; they might be expected to talk less about "plot", but they talked more. He appears to have done a better job focusing their attention on "directing" and "cinematography" in Bicycle Thief than I did; I would expect the opposite. I would expect his students to make more comparisons with literary forms, but we are both equally unsuccessful there.

What are the relationships among the variables? To the general question, Are there any differences in the ways men and women, film buffs and normal people, Communication majors and non-majors, etc., talk about films or the amount of time they spend, the general answer for this group is "no."

In general, no significant differences and few interesting differences showed up between men and women, majors and non-majors, people who had had other film classes and those who were taking their first, people who evaluated the course low or high, people who received good grades or poor ones--and the mean number of conversations, the mean number of topics discussed, and the mean amount of time spent discussing them. Communication majors, and females,

tended to get higher grades; Communication majors tended to have lower cumulative GPAs. Students who had higher grades tended to have more conversations, and those who evaluated the course highly spent more time talking.

I would expect film buffs and people who had had another film course to talk more about more things and to do better in the course; that none of these differences were observed may be due to the small numbers involved (these analyses were run with a subset of 26 subjects who had responded to all six films, and another subset of 48--including the above 26--who had responded to at least four of the last five). Self-definition of "film buff" may not be accurate. Or, of course, my expectations may be wrong. Research now underway with other populations will clarify these points.

There were some differences in topics discussed. Detailed analyses were done on the films Kane and High School. More males than would be expected, and fewer film buffs, talked about "acting--supporting roles" in Kane. (This was also true of males talking about High School--whatever "supporting roles" means in High School!) In Kane, more males than you would expect talked about "editing" and fewer, about its "social importance." Fewer majors, and fewer buffs, talked about its "social importance." This was also true, for buffs, with regard to High School.

With High School, more males talked about the "script" (?) than you would expect; and fewer majors and buffs than you would expect. More males talked about "cinematography."

There were a few other differences, but the numbers involved are small and the differences may be misleading. For example, 28 males and 18 females responded to the questions about Kane in this particular analysis. Nine males and 3 females talked about "acting--supporting roles." That is significantly more males than you would expect; a difference--but meaningful? Four males and 7

females talked about "social importance"; different--but meaningful? These differences would have to show up consistently over several groups of students for me to have faith in them. I don't mean that I think there are no differences among certain types of students and certain kinds of responses; but I do think that generalization from this data would be premature.

Individuals. Only a few students had no conversations about any of the films. No students had a consistently large number of conversations, though there were several who consistantly had lengthy conversations. It was rare for a student who generally had short conversations to indulge in a long one. Most of the long conversations responsible for the great range of time in Table I can be attributed to the same few students. I am inclined to think that these are students I would call buffs--or knowledgeable--on the basis of their classroom discussion; but the survey procedure was anonymous.

Assuming that the number of topics discussed is an index of sophistication, there is no evidence of individual "growth," or a relation between the number of topics and the grade in the course. Again, this lack of relationship may not be "true" because of the confounding of films with course duration.

Discussion and recommendations. My assumption was that the more students talk about film, and the more things in film that they talk about, the more knowledgeable they are and the more successful my class has been. This research indicates that what goes on in class does affect what students talk about, but that the relationships may be subtle and unexpected. The next step, as I see it, is to eliminate the confounding of films and class duration by showing the same films at the beginning and end of the class--perhaps not to the same students, but to comparable groups. The questionnaire should be changed to include more variables relevant to documentaries. An absolute grade at the end of the course should not be used for comparisons; instead, a measure of the student's change in

understanding and appreciation which could be related to changes in the number and type of conversational variables, should be used. Changes in out-of-class film and TV viewing habits should also be measured and compared with class variables. And comparisons should be made with other teachers at other universities. This research is underway.

To the extent that we, as teachers, are concerned with how students use our teaching outside of class, information like this cannot help but restructure and improve our classroom work.

TABLE I

Number of subjects, number of conversations, total time

	Potemkin	Kane	Juliet	Bike Thief	High Schl.
Number Responding	74	58	57	52	78
% No Conversations	23	19	26	40	38
Number of Conversations*					
Mean	1.35	1.7	1.38	1.0	1.22
S.D.	.95	1.3	1.26	1.0	1.34
Mdn.	1.41	1.5	1.17	0.81	0.89
Range	3	6	5	4	6
Total Time* (Minutes)					
Mean	9.7	14.11	10.36	8.22	15.09
S.D.	8.2	12.71	9.23	6.84	18.14
Mdn.	7.0	10.06	7.5	5.31	8.5
Range	44	58	44	29	88

*Includes those reporting NO conversations.

TABLE II

Mean number of topics discussed

	Potemkin	Kane	Juliet	Bike Thief	High Schl.
Mean number of topics discussed ("no conver" included)	3.28	4.24	3.65	2.32	2.51
S.D.	2.51	2.87	3.00	2.36	2.51
N	74	58	57	52	78
% "No conversation"	24	19	26	40	38

TABLE III

Per cent of subjects discussing various topics
("No conversations" not included)

TOPIC	Potemkin	Kane	Juliet	Bike Thief	High Schl.
PLOT	67	81	71	90	48
ACTING-LEADS	10	70	52	45	15
ACTING-SUPPORT	5	34	24	39	19
SCRIPT	28	34	26	32	8
DIRECTION	46	45	48	13	25
CINEMATOGRAPHY	44	43	50	10	29
EDITING	54	26	24	3	29
SETS & COSTUMES	14	30	71	16	23
THEME	68	70	64	71	81
PERSONAL SIG.	25	21	19	19	58
SOCIAL IMPORT.	44	30	7	32	42
COMPARE FILMS	16	34	33	16	25
COMPARE BKS, PLAYS	0	2	0	0	2
OTHER	5	4	5	3	4
N	74	58	57	52	78
% NO CONVERSATION	24	19	26	40	38

TABLE IV

Instructor comparison
Per cent of subjects discussing various topics
("No conversations" not included)

Film	CITIZEN KANE		BICYCLE THIEF	
Teacher	LYNCH	OTHER	LYNCH	OTHER
TOPIC				
PLOT	81	50	90	88
ACTING*LEADS	70	50	45	38
ACTING*SUPPORT	34	33	39	12
SCRIPT	34	28	32	12
DIRECTION	45	28	13	38
CINEMATOGRAPHY	43	56	10	25
EDITING	26	22	3	0
SETS & COSTUMES	30	6	16	12
THEME	70	61	71	75
PERSONAL SIG.	21	33	19	25
SOCIAL IMPORT.	30	22	32	25
COMPARE FILMS	34	39	16	12
COMPARE BKS, PLAYS	2	0	0	0
OTHER	4	6	3	12
N	58	25	52	21
% NO CONVERS	19	28	40	62